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ABSTRACT

Self-study is defined as participant study of practice, and it has often been questioned as a form of research. Whether self-study can be valid when generalized or whether it merely represents personal reflections was explored in a case study. During a year as a teacher of secondary students, the researcher/participants kept a journal as part of a self-study of teaching practice. The journal, interviews with 22 students in the class, and student writings were used to evaluate the teaching experience. The case study gave rise to thoughts on self-study that begin with the observation that self-study defines the focus of study and requires a constant commitment to checking data and interpretation with others. It is difficult for a person to change his or her own interpretations when examining his or her own experience, and the perspective colleagues can lend can be very valuable. Self-study is enhanced when it is a shared task. In addition it is noted that self-study outcomes require immediate action so that the focus of study is constantly changing. The many complications of the self-study process mean that it is best performed in a collaborative setting. (Contains eight references.) (SLD)

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The Nature Of Knowledge Development In The Self-Study Practice

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Introduction

There has been an increasing interest in the self-study of practice. Between the 1996 and 1997 annual meetings of AERA, the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practice (S-STEP) Group held a meeting to review, analyse and plan the future of their research agenda in an extended way. The idea of self-study has evolved from several significant educational perspectives. In some ways self-study appears to be related to the development of Schön's (1983) ideas about reflection on practice. For example Munby and Russell (1994) have developed Schön's ideas to highlight the "authority of experience" as a key to the way teachers may better understand teaching and learning. There is also a realisation that there is no educational change without people change and by focusing on personal practice and experience, teachers may undertake genuine enquiry that leads to a better understanding of the complexities of teaching and learning.

Self-study is defined as participant study of experience and has inevitably been queried as a form of research. Is the outcome of a self-study merely personal reflections or does it have claims to aspire to generalisable forms of knowledge? There appear to be at least three responses to this debate. The first explores the relationship between two ways of gaining knowledge about educational practice. Richardson (1994) distinguishes between two forms of research on practice: formal research and practical inquiry. She argues that "Both forms...may be conducted by the practitioner, and at times, practical inquiry may be turned into formal research...one could suggest, then, that practical inquiry may be foundational to formal research that will be truly useful in improving practice." (pp. 7 & 8).

A second response has been to argue that participant research has unique features which deserve acknowledgment and recognition as a distinct genre of research and a debate has developed (Wong 1995, Baumann 1996, Northfield 1996). A third response is to observe the professional development that occurs when practitioners gain the confidence and skills to reflect on, and reframe, their experiences. Self-study then is seen as an indication that a professional is willing to accept that their experience is the major source of improvement in their practice. Encouragement of self-study therefore becomes an option for all those committed to the improvement of professional practice.

A case study of a self-study

This paper is based on the experiences of the first author during a one year teaching allotment in a secondary school where he taught Mathematics and Science and was the Home Group teacher for one class of students in their first year of secondary school (Year 7). At the same time he was the Director of Pre-service Education in the Faculty of Education at Monash University, an academic role with administration, teaching and research interests in teacher education, teaching and learning. During this teaching year, Jeff maintained a daily journal of his high school activities including descriptions, reactions and interpretations associated with his teaching and his students' learning. The journal was an important part of Jeff's own self-study of his teaching experience in a secondary school.

In this return to secondary school teaching, Jeff the researcher became Jeff the practitioner and worked from a self-study/practical research perspective through to more formal, more widely available and accessible research knowledge. By exploring some of these experiences and the resultant knowledge we hope to enhance understanding of the teaching, learning and research possibilities associated with the knowledge created and communicated through self-study. We also address the question of whether the results of self-study can be made more widely available in ways that allow new meanings to be established by others.

The paper draws on three main data sources. Jeff's daily journal, interviews conducted by Carol Jones with 22 of the students in the class, and student writing from both regular classroom tasks and specific responses to classroom experiences. The journal was also read by interested teachers in the school and provided a stimulus for extended discussion about students and teaching and learning. At the end of the year, Jeff reviewed the journal and developed 24 theme statements about teaching and learning, grouped under five headings:

- Nature of learning;
- Creating conditions for learning;
- Student perspectives on learning;
- Process of teaching and learning;
- Overall reactions to the experience.

Each statement summarised significant experiences and suggested possible interpretations of significant issues related to teaching and learning. Carol spent time in Jeff's classes observing his teaching and working with, and interviewing, students. Her presence in the class helped her to get to know the students and to be accepted as an observer with no teaching or assessment status. Thus her interview data is most interesting and reveals a student voice and perspective on the classroom experiences. The students' writing was equally useful as they completed specific learning tasks and other regular classroom activities.

Both authors are teacher educators trying to understand the schooling situations for which we are to prepare and support teachers. We are also searching for more effective ways to prepare teachers. It is therefore not surprising that we see the opportunity to spend an extensive period of time in school classrooms as a valuable learning experience. First hand experience must allow a better understanding of current learning issues and should surely better inform the teacher education approaches being undertaken. The value of recent and relevant experience for teacher educators is almost regarded as self evident. However, we would now argue that the connection between school experience and improvement in teacher education is not clear. On the one hand we would argue that greater opportunities should exist for teacher educators to work in schools and classrooms, but the experience alone is not sufficient. Certain conditions for learning about teaching and teacher education need to be established to make the effort worthwhile.

Two conditions made this experience worthwhile. The first was the involvement of Carol Jones. Jeff needed the opportunity to reflect on the student responses to his teaching and Carol helped him to do this. Carol was also able to interview students and provide a student perspective on the classroom activities and act as a colleague as the teaching and learning situations were interpreted from the perspective of all participants and their background and aspirations. The daily journal record and the variety of data gathered from the class began to make some sense. Carol therefore provided the conditions to begin learning from experience.

The second condition for learning from the experience involved the second author taking an interest in the journal and the data and so persisting with the study. The book (Loughran and Northfield, 1996) could not have been written without the involvement of a colleague who was able to remain at a distance from the experience and see the trends developing over the year. It describes the progress made in understanding teaching and learning and the implications for teacher education. We have also developed a number of assertions about the nature of self-study.

The nature of the self-study and the knowledge and understanding gained

The following statements will be used to begin discussion of the features of self-study. In the tradition of self-study they are intended to provide prompts for the readers experience. These statements form the focus of the round table discussion associated with this paper.

1. Self-study defines the focus of study (i.e. context and nature of a person's activity) not the way the study is carried out. Understanding the context and the nature of one's work is important and is a shaping factor in self-study but self-study is not simply coping with the pressures or constraints of these factors, it is the development of an understanding, of reframing, and reconsidering action within those constraints.

2. Effective self-study requires a commitment to checking data and interpretations with others. It is crucial to self-study that this occur and the value of involving others is demonstrated when interpretations, conclusions or situations resonate with others who have had the opportunity to analyse the data independently. Clearly, the extension of this is that the validity and reliability of the data sources are tested by working with others.

3. It is very difficult for a person to change their interpretations (frame of reference) when their own experience is examined. As an individual is so deeply involved in their own environment, it is often very difficult to step back from the situation and reconsider the experiences from another view point. It may well be that one's own experience is too personal to seriously question their own frame of reference.

4. Colleagues are likely to frame an experience in ways not thought of by the person carrying out the self-study. This point is a natural progression from points 2 and 3 in that the need to work with others broadens the possibilities for validation and clarification as well as reframing.

5. Valuable learning occurs when self-study is a shared task. The learning is intensely personal, but self-study itself requires collaboration. In many ways learning through self-study is "a shared adventure" (Loughran and Gunstone, 1996).

6. A high level of self confidence is necessary as "successful" experiences have unintended outcomes and closely held assumptions and ideas are queried. Self-confidence is a most interesting aspect to self-study. One needs to be comfortable with the sense of vulnerability necessary to genuinely study personal practice and the overarching need to learn through self-study will inevitably create personal conflict and a sense of dissonance.

7. Self-study outcomes demand immediate action so that the focus of study is constantly changing. Learning through self-study inevitably means that the results of self-study create new opportunities for self-study. Therefore, as learning opportunities arise they need to be grasped and acted on, hence the situation of self-study is ever changing and developing.

8. There are differences between self-study (as we think about it) and reflection on practice.

9. Understanding and identifying with the context in which the self-study is situated is crucial to understanding and developing a reasonable interpretation of the events.

10. Dilemmas, tensions and disappointments dominate the data gathering and the attention in self-study. As self-study tends to be directed by problems, dilemmas and tensions, it is inevitable that these situations direct data gathering. In many ways, successes are glossed over in an almost "to be expected" fashion as the mind focusses on the unexpected or the unexplained. Surprise and curiosity therefore spring from self-study, and shape it.

11. The audience is critical in shaping self-study reports. Just as self-study is not an individual task but is best as a collaborative enterprise, so too the reporting of self-study is impacted by the audience of the report. Self-study if it is to move beyond the individual, needs to resonate with others in similar situations, therefore the way self-study is reported is important in helping to make the findings clear and meaningful to others. Obviously then, the form of reporting is shaped by the audience.

The importance of collaboration may seem to contradict the personal nature of self-study (see points 2, 3, 4, and 5) but it is essential for checking that focus, data collection and interpretations do not become self justifications and rationalization of experience. This collaboration provides some confidence that experiences and interpretations can be offered more widely for consideration.

For Jeff, the return to teaching was often a confusing and unsettling experience. The conditions rarely seemed to be suitable to initiate different teaching and learning activities with the class. His journal entries continued to outline disappointments as he searched for understanding of his context. The dailiness of teaching and its unpredictability appeared to dominate his reflections. As he began to understand the student perspective their responses to the demands of their schooling often made more sense than the learning attitudes and outcomes he was seeking. Yet the overall experience with the class was enjoyable and satisfying. What tended to get documented in the journal and discussed with others were the surprises, dilemmas and tensions, perhaps giving a more negative picture of the experience.

The future of self-study

Teacher knowledge generation (teacher research) depends on teachers finding ways of sharing critical experiences. The tacit knowledge must be made explicit if we are to consider alternative frames of reference that may lead to deeper understanding of teaching and learning. The danger is that teachers will interpret situations in ways that reinforce existing perceptions. Genuine study of classrooms is associated with a willingness to reconsider alternative frames of reference and colleagues are an important source of ideas and support as the teaching and learning is reviewed.

In addition to encouraging self-study the Special Interest Group (SIG) has a responsibility to critically analyse the nature of the process and the features of the new knowledge that it yields. In the end the value of self-study will depend on providing convincing evidence that it can be undertaken with rigour. This will require addressing the issues of quality, reliability and validity if self-study is to continue to make a contribution to knowledge and understanding.

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